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ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers and administrators often see the writing lab as a simple extension of the classroom experience, rather than as the tutorial practice that it should be with interactive one-to-one teaching. Students should be acting participants, spending at least 50% of lab time talking, questioning, trying out, practicing, and composing. Tutors should be nonjudgmental and nonevaluative in helping the student achieve better composition solutions. Tutoring adds the following elements to writing instruction: (1) instruction "in," not "about" the writing process (a tutor guiding a student through some organizing strategies with a specific piece of writing helps that student in ways that a textbook chapter about organizing cannot); (2) opportunities for dialogue (as the writer-tutor dialogue develops, the writer learns how to engage, clarify, think about, and structure a topic); (3) awareness of audience (the tutor gives immediate feedback, noting where more content or explanation is needed or where questions arise in the reader's mind); and (4) interactive instruction and diagnosis (when writers are working on rhetorical skills or conventions or grammar, they are not merely acquiring bits of data but are mastering a complex skill). (NKA)

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Tutorial Instruction: Another Dimension Needed in Writing Programs

Those of us who work in writing labs know how different tutorial instruction is. We spend a lot of time in tutor training sessions pointing out those differences because we know the first inclination of the beginning tutor is to be an English teacher:

-Beginning tutors usually think it's their job to be critical--to point out mistakes. That's what English teachers and their red pens do.

-Beginning tutors also think it's their job to talk at the student--the more talk, the better. That shows how much the tutor knows.

Wrenching new tutors out of those misconceptions is hard, but eventually, we do succeed. We tell them startling things such as "If you are doing more than 50% of the talking, something's wrong," and "The tutor's job is not to offer judgments, criticism, or evaluation. Instead, the tutor is a coach, a facilitator," or whatever other aspect we stress of the helping role tutors play.

And it is this difference that I want to focus on here because while we can work with our tutors until they understand the difference between the tutorial setting and the classroom, we don't do as well with our colleagues in English departments and across campus. Hence, the image problem of writing labs.

What are writing labs for? Ask a classroom teacher or an administrator, and you may get the classic misperception--that the lab is simply more of the

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same. For those students who didn't get it the first time around, there's a place to tell them again. It's the old "say it again, but louder" syndrome that we use with people who don't speak English well. And so that view from the outside makes writing centers look like quick fix-it stations, band-aid places that are an adjunct service to classrooms.

This causes a number of problems:

1. For those who see writing labs as the place for tutors to tell it to them again, labs are a bit of an embarrassment--an admission that the job wasn't done right the first time or that the teacher should have been able to set them straight in the classroom or conference. The consequence of this is that some teachers are hesitant to be seen using the lab. For administrators, there is the admission that the school is letting in substandard students who need coaching to get them up to speed. Thus, in times of tight budgets, administrators are likely to question the expense of it all.

2. There's another problem for those who see the writing center as the appropriate place for remedial students or students with "writing difficulties." That's a strange phrase, "writing difficulties,"--whoever has "writing easies"? All writing has difficulties or ranges in difficulty from task to task. And that's the point, of course. Reserving the lab and tutorial help in writing only for less skilled writers keeps good students from taking advantage of a whole huge area of instruction that they can and should profit from.

3. A third problem caused by misperceptions of what tutorial instruction is all about is that writing labs are used as grammar fix-it stations. This is

the equivalent, roughly, of using a sledgehammer to push in a thumbtack. Sure, such a tool can do the job, but it has so much power to do so much more.

Given the problems with these misperceptions, let's look at what tutorial instruction really is, to see how the interactive nature of one-to-one teaching offers a dimension of writing instruction that belongs in every writing program. Tutorials are a complement because they offer something different in kind and something necessary to writers.

What makes this difference, as I've said, is the interaction between writer and student. That old rule of thumb we tell tutors, that students should be participating at least 50% of the time, means that students do a lot of the talking, questioning, trying out, practicing, composing. Interactive means that both parties are active--and that they interact in the sense of responding to what the other person offers. This means not only true dialog but also that both persons change course or do something different because of what the other person tossed into the conversation. So, there's a meshing, diverging, changing motion to the interaction.

Moreover, tutorials are non-judgmental, non-evaluative. The student is outside the classroom, not trying to please the tutor or get the tutor to give her a good grade--instead, she is using the tutor to get to better solutions and isn't afraid to reject the tutor's comments or move beyond them--or question them. Freed of that constraint, which unfortunately hovers behind every teacher's conference conversation, tutorials are a partnership, a working relationship that is indeed different.

So far, I've tried to describe tutoring, but what does it add to writing instruction?

1. It offers instruction <u>in</u> the writing process, not <u>about</u> it.

Textbooks and classroom instruction can talk about writing processes, and such discussion is helpful, but not sufficient, as it still leaves the writer alone to cope as best he can at the crucial time of writing. However, to offer instruction in writing processes, we need to work with students as they progress through a piece of discourse. The tutorial is a ready-made setting to do exactly that, as writers plan, develop, write, and revise--accompanied by a tutor sitting there with the writer. Together, writer and tutor move through various writing processes.

As an easily recognizable example, consider the process of proofreading. Not the most exciting stage of writing, but a necessary one, and one that some students have great difficulties with. We can talk about proofreading, even demonstrate it in the classroom, but the real A-HA experience of feeling what it's like--of engaging in the act--only happens when doing it. And those of us who tutor and have spent time working through the process of proofreading with a student sitting next to us know the difference. Or, another example. Learning how to organize a piece of discourse is far more complicated and more impossible to talk about. But a tutor guiding a student through some organizing strategies, with a piece of writing in front of them to work on, helps that student in ways that a 30-page textbook chapter about organizing cannot.

So, that's one dimension that writing lab tutorials add to writing programs--active instruction in writing processes--actually moving through various processes with students. But how do most programs take advantage of that? For most of us in writing labs, we see students only when their teachers have identified "problems" or "difficulties." And so the less skilled get to the lab when a paper is disorganized or when it isn't adequately developed. Despite writing lab publicity--and journal articles--and conference talks--

where we explain over and over what we do, I wonder how many writing programs actually have lab components or have built into the system some way in which to add in tutorial instruction. When the class focuses on invention strategies, students might complement their classroom experience with lab experience in invention. When classroom discussion focuses on revision, there would be accompanying lab experience in revising. In other disciplines, this is self-obvious. Medical students hear lectures and talk about diagnostic techniques with patients and then move into hands-on experience diagnosing patients in hospital settings. But lab work as hands-on experience in what is being taught in writing programs is hardly that prevalent--if it exists at all.

Let's move on to other areas that interactive instruction in writing can add to writing programs.

2. Tutorial instruction provides opportunities for dialog.

We talk about students' need to become part of discourse communities, to learn how to participate in academic discourse. But this is a complex matter, one that needs practice, as students learn how to use the vocabulary and conventions of the kind of discourse we want them to become familiar with. Tutorial discussion, though, is an apt place for this practice as tutor and student discuss the topic of a paper. As writers initiate a piece of discourse, the focused conversation that takes place does so within the appropriate conventions. As the writer-tutor dialog develops, the writer learns how to engage with a topic, how to clarify it, how to think about it, how to structure it. Even the vocabulary of academic discourse becomes more familiar through those conversations that often take place when writers come in to plan papers. What they are doing, besides going through planning with a tutor, is practicing the kind of discourse they will be writing, a valuable

exercise for writers becoming accustomed to academic writing. Of course, there is discussion in the classroom aimed at this, but the sustained dialog of the tutorial, that 50% participation, is far more rigorous than the occasional contributions students make to classroom discussion. And, equally important, in the non-evaluative setting of the tutorial, where the student gropes and practices, the student is far more willing to reach and try--and not be afraid of falling flat on his face--than he would be in contributing to a classroom discussion where friends and strangers are listening in.

This discussion and dialog leads to a third, and related contribution of interactive instruction.

3. Tutorials build awareness of audience

Helping writers build an appropriate awareness of the needs of the reader is difficult, but necessary. Classroom discussions are useful, but a bit abstract for many writers. Peer evaluation in the classroom can become helpful as the semester progresses, but too often peers reading each other's papers need to learn how to critique writing in a useful way.

In the writing lab, however, the tutor is trained beforehand to be the kind of reader needed, to give close and immediate feedback as the tutor progresses through the paper, noting where more context or explanation is needed, where questions arise in the reader's mind, where the reader is unsure of the direction or topic, and so on. Readers' needs become realities. In tutorials, writers participate actively with their readers, asking if this sentence or that phrase works. Typically, students try out revisions that start off with the student saying, "What if I add this here . . .?" And the tutor's response is immediate. "That helps me understand," or "But I still don't quite see how that emphasizes your point here." In short, writers get instant interaction

with readers, and the questions are motivated by a need to understand what readers need, not what teachers want. Too often when students phrase similar questions to teachers, they are really asking "Is this what you want here?" Real questions, addressed to a helpful, but honest reader, add a powerful dimension to the writer's understanding of what readers need. And that too is best done with a non-evaluative helper, coach, editor, consultant.

Once again, let me try to prove my point by an example. When I meet up with a student who has come to our writing lab because her teacher thought her paper was unclear, she is likely to be a bit sceptical--or beligerent--or defeatist. "My teacher doesn't like my writing," she'll say. Or, "I don't know what my teacher wants." Translation: "I can't fathom what this instructor wants out of me. Who knows what his problem is." Whatever it is, though, the student is sure it's not due to her unclear writing, because that paper was entirely clear to her. And so, as a tutor, I plunge in. I read and give back to the writer what I'm getting out of the paper, and when I'm stuck--or confused--I explain what's going wrong for me and what kind of help I need. After a while, the writer invariably begins to see that I need some help--and that the page isn't giving me enough or is leading me astray. Lack of clarity often becomes a matter of telling the student, "Why don't you get all that good stuff you're telling me onto the page." The writer nods agreeably. She doesn't seem to be wondering what my problem is. She's just seen a demonstration. That's the kind of reader response she needed, and the consequence is usually better writing the next time because the writer carries in her head that picture of me, the reader, struggling with her prose. She begins to internalize the ability to stand aside and look at her writing as the reader will do.

So far I've talked about what tutorial interaction adds to writing programs

in terms of what it does to help writers understand writing processes, what it does to provide useful dialog, and what it does to build audience awareness in the writer. There is still another dimension to be discussed here, that of interactive instruction and diagnosis.

4. Tutorials provide interactive instruction and diagnosis.

Whether writers are working on rhetorical skills or conventions of grammar, they are not merely acquiring bits of data to add to a storehouse of knowledge but are mastering a complex skill. To do so requires questions, clarification, backtracking, use of examples, and so on, all of which require interaction between the writer and someone who can respond. Only by finding out what the writer already knows, what misconceptions the writer might have, what inadequate assumptions the writer is making can the tutor have the explanation make sense. An easily understood proof of this is any handbook explanation of grammar. Those explanations don't really teach because they merely deliver some information, namely what the rule is. If that rule has any built-in conceptions, we need to monitor whether the student has a working knowledge of all that in order to understand. Any explanation that is going to help the writer will include some discussion about what the student knows and some answers to questions the student has. And this will be interactive discussion, not a lecture. Tutorials lend themselves well to that kind of teaching.

Interactive teaching, then, has a place in a writing program, a necessary place. Writing labs--where all this interaction goes on--aren't frills, adjuncts, supplements, or fix-it places to send the less skilled writer to. Instead, they provide--for all students--another dimension of writing instruction.